

The Benefits of a Remodeling Master Plan

Money, Time, and Emotional Travail Are All At Stake

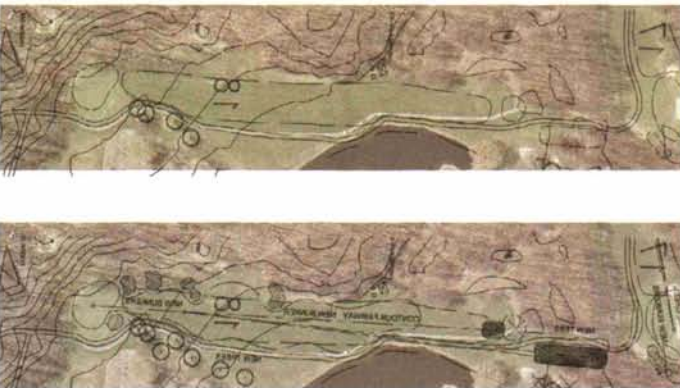
If you think good design is expensive, the old axiom has it that you have probably never suffered from bad design. It's true. Just as you would not set out on a cross-country trip without a map, devising a long-term approach to making your golf course the best it can be—in contrast to a series of ad hoc decisions to address problems as they arise, in piecemeal fashion—is invaluable. The long-range master plan is especially appropriate to golf course management because, like any dynamic entity, the golf course evolves over time. A well-conceived master plan is an excellent investment that pays dividends in time, money, and headaches avoided.

This is true regardless of a golf course's overriding objectives, whether to attract outside play or simply to keep members happy; in other words, whether the course is private, resort, or public. Chances for year-in, year-out success of the operation are enhanced immeasurably by a comprehensive long-range master plan. In this context, the fee for such a plan, prepared by a professional golf course architect and generally costing \$15,000 to \$35,000, is negligible. The benefits of a thoughtful and properly executed master plan are as follows:

- Provides a systematic procedure, a “road-map”, for Club/Owner(s) to bring about change.
 - Protects a course's original design integrity – particularly important on classical designs.
 - Promotes good shot values on each hole and good variety on the course as whole.
 - Identifies problems and proposes solutions to aspects of a course needing revision.
 - Saves Clubs/Owner(s) thousands, tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of dollars in construction and maintenance costs.
 - Makes the most of a course's esthetic appeal.
 - Increases a course's playability for golfers at all ability levels.
 - Boosts rounds played and revenue on public venues, membership and morale in private clubs.
- Curtails unilateral or “unauthorized” design decisions by board members, greens committee members, stockholders, and others.
- Reduces tensions among Club personnel that are often the product of such design decisions.
- Minimizes disruption of play by establishing efficient staging models for construction projects.
- Allows for ongoing adjustments to accommodate longer ball flights that result from technological improvements in golf balls and clubs.

In my 20-year career as a golf course architect, I have seen nearly as many different problems arise from the lack of a long-range master plan as I have had clients without one. A common pattern, however, has been to designate the golf course superintendent the “fall guy” for failures of ill-considered course

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Routing on top shows existing golf hole. Rendering on bottom show proposed changes to golf hole including realigning tees, contouring fairway and adding bunkering around green complex.

“improvements” instigated by board and committee members and/or owners who proceed without a professionally prepared master plan. Below are three cases describing travesties experienced by Clubs due to the absence of a comprehensive master plan to guide them.

CASE STUDY #1 “If at first you don’t succeed, try the same approach all over again.”

A well-known private Club in upstate New York (the name of which will remain confidential) called me in to create a long-range master plan, only after a recurring incident had understandably become the source of irritation for the Club’s president. Specifically, having deemed that the tee complex on a par-3 hole was too small and consequently suffered unacceptable turf deterioration, the Club had three times undertaken to rebuild it in a four-year period, to no avail, at a total cost of about \$75,000. Typically, the superintendent shouldered the blame, even though he had acted on instructions from a board member. (As Robert Trent Jones Jr. once famously pointed out: “There are as many course architects as there are golfers. Everyone is an architect in his Walter Mitty dreams.”)

In the club’s first attempt to correct the problem, the new tees, although larger, were terribly misaligned and had uneven surfaces that retained excess water. Attempt number two corrected the alignment difficulties but, in the process, significantly reduced the surface area, thus compromising the original goal of the undertaking.

Two years later, a third attempt to fix these same tees proved worse than the first two: The tee mix became contaminated during this attempt resulting in soggy teeing surfaces that never dried out to the desired consistency.

This teeing complex was just one of the difficulties—and impending difficulties—that was addressed in a long-range master plan. As frequently happens, the immediate problem—in this case, just a teeing area that is not big enough—was tied to several other traffic and drainage issues that needed to be resolved

simultaneously. The condition of the tee box was only symptomatic of the difficulties at work.

CASE STUDY #2 “Why didn’t we think of this before we started construction?”

The facts of this case study can be heartbreaking, but the sequence of events is by no means unprecedented. Again, as with the above example, this could have been prevented with a long-range master plan.

Here, a highly reputed public facility in the Midwest found it was losing rounds each year. Feedback from customers indicated that the course was perceived as a bit shopworn, particularly in relation to newer courses in the area that were eroding its market share. Management responded with a major initiative that included rebuilt tee boxes and a new irrigation system. Unfortunately, without oversight by a design professional and a master plan, these costly revisions resulted in money not well spent. For one thing, the new tee boxes were both misaligned and petrified as a result of improper construction; what’s more, their placement failed to capitalize on the chance to appeal to players of varying skill levels—a point they eventually recognized upon review of a master plan.

More dire was the inadequacy of the new irrigation system, built at a cost of some \$750,000, much of which had to be dug up and reinstalled for reasons that would have been evident had there been a master plan. Specifically, these included the relocation or reconfiguration of green complexes, bunkers, and fairways, both to improve the course’s strategic quality and to promote healthy turfgrass. In turn, the master plan included a tree plan that not only facilitated routine maintenance but improved the golf experience by eliminating excessively tight playing corridors and obstructed views of such course features as landing areas, bunkers, and even greens.

All told, poorly planned and / or constructed alterations to the course cost roughly

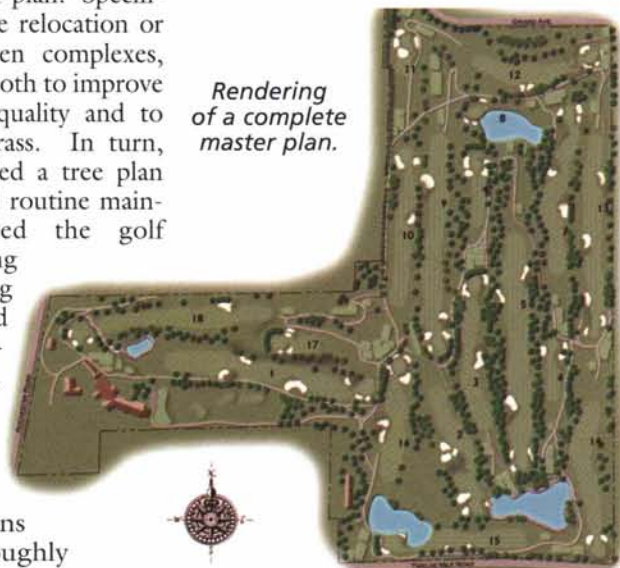
\$225,000 to redo correctly—an emphatic argument for a professionally prepared long-range master plan.

CASE STUDY #3 “Our bunkers simply don’t work.”

This case focuses on a popular resort on the East Coast. The case is an object lesson in the usefulness of ordering priorities for course improvements and began with a board member’s dissatisfaction with the condition of the sand in the bunkers. He instructed the superintendent to remove all the existing sand and replace it with an expensive variety that had to be trucked to the site. Once again, this was done despite the expressed misgivings of the superintendent, who judged the deficiency was a consequence of the bunkers’ subsurface drainage system, not the sand itself.

One year later, the club set out to improve shot values and strategic intrigue on a hole-by-hole basis. With these goals in mind, the club agreed to a comprehensive master plan for the entire golf course. One of the first and most important findings was that the positioning of bunkers was, almost without exception, obsolete. The original design dated to 1960, before the advent of longer balls and clubs. Thus, the bunker placements had become largely decorative and no longer strategic. The board member who had authorized the superfluous replacement

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*Rendering
of a complete
master plan.*

of the sand is no longer at the resort; regrettably, neither is the \$215,000 required to complete the job.

Bunkers and tee boxes have now been arranged so that the course is as enjoyable a golfing challenge in 2006 as when it opened in 1960. Still, a little consideration of the facility's long-term objectives would have gone a long way. Surely improved golf club and ball technology existed two years prior, when the sand was replaced.

Superintendents often ask me if their course needs a master plan. My answer is simple: If you plan to make any changes or improvements to the golf course—or you even think this is a possibility, and it almost always is—then you need a master plan. To

reiterate, good design is comparatively inexpensive. Construction, especially redundant construction, is expensive. Also, the benefits of a long-range master plan are many, and money is only part of the equation. A master-plan document is a significant tool for the golf course superintendent to make sure that everyone at the club is “on the same page” in terms of future improvements to the golf course. It's money in the bank from both a fiscal and a diplomatic point of view.

In order to ensure that the master plan is the best that it can be, contact a practicing golf course architect and secure a price to complete such a study. You and your club or course will be glad you did. True, the future is ultimately unpredictable, but there is much to be said for thinking past the present, not to mention doing it right the first time.



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